

ASA REPORT'S RECOMMENDATIONS

The American Society on Aging study “Older Adults of Color and Environmental Health” included the following recommendations for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Some of the recommendations cover broad issues, such as the need for better monitoring of employer compliance with federal health and safety standards; improved pesticide-reduction strategies; more targeted research to gauge how specific toxins affect residents in polluted areas; more active translation of research findings into practice; and advocacy for more affordable, adequate and accessible healthcare for all Americans. In general, the ASA report calls for the national agenda to address issues related to cultural differences, gender, age, race, ethnicity, social class, education and disability. Here are some of the recommendations that are especially important for older adults.

- A one-size-fits-all approach to the EPA national agenda on the environment and aging will not work. The agenda should include separate components dealing with issues facing low-income elders of all ethnicities, as well as those affecting middle-class and affluent elders. People less affected by a hazardous environment may be willing to volunteer to clean up garbage on coastal shorelines, for example. Those who live next to pollution-heavy refineries may be more concerned with getting the companies to stop polluting and with having access to safe drinking water.

- A free program needs to be implemented to develop leadership skills among both elders and elder-advocacy and service organizations in communities of color, so that they can represent the interests of older people and educate their communities about issues of environmental justice.

- EPA should create a safe, quick and effective way to file environmental complaints that is accessible to individuals without a computer and to those who may be more proficient in a languages other than English. EPA should publicize these methods through community organizations that do outreach to elders.

- EPA should recruit older adults to represent the interests of people of color on its Senior Initiative Committee. These individuals would be in regular communication with local environmental and community organizations.

- Older people and their families need easy-to-understand information on environmental issues in a variety of languages and materials that apply both culturally sensitive approaches and communication methods most appropriate for elders, such as large print and clear color contrast. This information needs to be distributed free through libraries, churches, local governmental offices and other groups that work with older adults.

- EPA offices should conduct regular town hall meetings—with interpreters available—where residents can express their concerns. The agency should issue a report after each meeting that includes follow-up information, feedback items from the previous session and information on steps being made to address community issues.

- Environmental health issues for elders should be integrated into community programs, such as adult-education courses, senior centers, hospitals, tribal or local government resources, and programs for public health and safety.

- Additional education and advocacy among professionals in aging and public health is needed to bring their knowledge about environmental hazards to elders up to par with what they know about such areas as exercise and nutrition.

- EPA should establish safe guidelines for the use of cleansers, disinfectants, insecticides and other chemicals at senior living facilities.

- Mentoring programs should be established in which older adults and young people can work together on solving common environmental problems. ❖